# Using Different Primary Modes to Build a Definition Essay

Let's take a sample topic, one which is abstract and intangible, not a physical object-in other words, a topic similar to what my typical assignment calls for. I'll sketch out how several different modes might be used to define this topic. For these brief sketches, I'll use the concept of *kinship*.

### The Example Mode

You can define something by giving examples of it. If I am trying to define kinship in this way, I would look around myself for good examples of what I feel represents true kinship. I could easily start with my family, as most writers probably would. But here, I might make a shift, the sort which makes a topic more personal and unique. I might give examples of "kin" who are not blood relations. Perhaps my final definition, portrayed by these examples, might have more to do with demonstrated loyalty than with ancestry. Perhaps I never realized this myself, until I explored the concept of kinship by examining those people I consider akin to me, without before now asking myself why.

### The Classification Mode

Another way to explore kinship could be to break it into its component, crucial parts. I've already given a hint of this approach above, when I mentioned loyalty. That might become one of my "categories," which would consist of the most significant charactenstics, generally speaking, of one who is kin. Other "categories" or characteristics might be trustworthiness, a willingness to listen, and so forth. My approach this time might be to first discuss these characteristics (in my GE) before telling stories featuring them (my SE); this might differ from my body paragraphs in an Example approach in that those might consist more heavily of SE; and more importantly, those examples might not include all the basic characteristics of kinship, which a classification essay should.

### The Comparison/Contrast Mode

The seed of this approach was also visible in my description of using the Example mode, when I mentioned loyalty as a characteristic instead of ancestry. Those words "instead of" imply a contrast. If I wished, this mode could become the whole organizing principle of my essay. I might find myself contrasting a list of qualities which don't guarantee kinship against a list of those which do. At some point, I might realize that I was combining contrast with classification, or example, which would be fine, but there is no need for me to go out of my way either to seek to do that or to avoid it; as I say, the modes tend naturally to merge to some extent. If you choose a primary mode and remain focused on it, your primary focus will be obvious.

If I don't wish to define kinship by use of a contrast, I might most easily define it by comparing it to another concept or feeling which comes closest to it, and with which I'm perhaps more familiar. Along this line, I might choose to compare kinship to something like empathy, or maybe "best-friendship."

### The Cause/Effect Mode

Lastly, I might feel most comfortable in defining kinship by discussing its causes. I might list causes like common goals; similar reactions to certain situations; common likes and dislikes; and so forth. Or, I might define kinship in terms of its effects, such as a sense of belonging; of being listened to, and valued; and so forth.

### What Is the Definition Mode?

Most basically, this mode is simply another in the lineup of different ways to examine a particular topic. There is little left hidden by its name: to explore a topic with the definition mode, you attempt to define that topic. In other words, you tell what it is, and you do this in a full enough sense so that a reader comes away with a useful understanding of the topic, and you yourself come away with a better understanding of it than you began with.

### Features of the Definition Mode

This means that to write a definition essay, you will choose either the example mode (supporting a thesis by describing several general contexts or situations in which that thesis holds true); the persuasive mode (supporting a thesis with several logical reasons why that position or opinion should be accepted); or the classification mode (supporting a thesis or exploring an issue by breaking a whole into its parts); or the comparison mode (supporting a position by referring to a similar case in a like context); or the contrast mode (supporting a position by showing how two things or situations are unlike); or the cause mode (exploring the causes of a given situation--sometimes appears similar to the persuasive mode); or the effect mode (exploring the effects of a given situation). Other possible options are the narrative mode, the descriptive mode, the process analysis mode, and so forth. Do your best to choose a primary mode with which you are most comfortable.

Truthfully, one thing, which writers begin to realize at some point, is that a writer never sticks purely with one mode in the first place. This means, for instance, that you have used the narrative and descriptive modes within your SE and GEof any body paragraph, among other places. It also means that whether you plan it or not, you will end up using more than one mode.

 That point brings me to an important piece of advice about writing with this mode: Don't get too fancy. I mean it's not necessary to go out of your way to include 3 or 4 modes in your essay. They'll almost certainly be there anyhow. So if you just choose a primary mode and go from there, the rest will usually take care of itself. And here's another point to remember while planning and writing: Your primary choice of mode should be apparent in your essay.